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Learning experience, proactive coping, high standards and undergraduate students' initial orientation toward the graduate studies programs in psychology

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Abstract

This study focuses on factors associated with undergraduate psychology students' initial orientation toward the graduate studies programs in psychology. Participants in the study were 150 undergraduate psychology students (1st, 2nd and 3rd year of study), aged 20 to 45 years ($M = 23.43$, $SD = 5.82$), 25 male and 125 female, at a private faculty of psychology in Bucharest, Romania. Data were collected with three self-report scales. The research's results advocate for a proactive approach of trainees during their undergraduate studies in order to prepare them for a reasonable set of criteria in choosing their specialty in psychology.

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1. Introduction

As mentioned in the relevant literature, „Psychology remains a fascinating and vibrant field of study that offers a diverse array of career options and experiences,, (Helms and Rogers, 2011, p.297), and “Psychology is a science of great fertility, exploration, and dynamic change. Not only does psychology keep finding new areas of exploration, but new careers continue to appear as disciplines overlap and cross-disciplinary projects appear” (Oster, 2006, p.54). These aspects could explain the extraordinary growth in the number, size and diversity of undergraduate and master's level programs seen in the past years in most countries across the globe (including Romania), programs

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which are preparing young people for a career in the field of Psychology. This growth is guaranteed to bring about changes in the way the Psychology student chooses a specialization path even at an undergraduate program level.

Even though it is believed that, generally, students do not make their career preferences until after they have graduated, the more recent literature found that during the second and third year of their undergraduate studies, students already develop certain preferences (Khader, Al-Zoubi, Amarín, Alkafagei, Khasawneh, et al., 2008; Helms and Rogers, 2011).

The preferences for master's degree programs, when formed/verbalized during the undergraduate years, can facilitate or obstruct the acquisition of basic knowledge offered by these programs. This is exactly why it is important to become aware of the students' preferences regarding the master's degree programs during their undergraduate studies: „Learning about the process of obtaining an education in the field and pursuing career goals can at times be daunting,, (Helms and Rogers, 2011, p.297).

There are many studies in the literature on the specialty choice in psychology (Leong, Zachar, Conant and Tolliver, 2007), some of them focusing on the personal characteristics of individuals choosing a particular careers (Borges, Manuel, Duffy, Fedyna and Jones, 2009), some focusing on interests, personality, and cognitive abilities (Wicherts and Vorst, 2010) and others focusing on the personal perspective the student has in relation to „psychology's strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities, as well as what these factors might mean for bachelor's and graduate level students in the field”(Helms and Rogers, 2011, p.291)

In the present study, the personal traits that have been selected as being relevant in connection to the students' preferences for certain fields of specialization in the area of Psychology were proactive coping and the tendency to have high standards in life. The two traits haven't been empirically studied as thoroughly in relation to the orientation toward the field of specialization in psychology, even though they are very important - especially when the flexible character of this profession is considered (Oster, 2006).

According to Greenglass (2002), proactive coping consists of “efforts to develop general resources, thereby facilitating the achievement of personal goals and working towards personal growth” (p.6) and it can be characterized by the fact that “it integrates proactive goal attainment with identification and utilization of social resources, and it utilizes proactive emotional coping for self-regulatory goal attainment” (p.7). Not only does it “utilize social and nonsocial resources; it employs visions of success” (Greenglass, Schwarzer, Jakubiec, Fiksenbaum and Taubert, 1999, p. 14).

In academic environment the tendency to state and to maintain high standards is correlated with academic achievement and seen as a factor that can motivate the student to strive for excellence. Silverman (2007) mentions Murray, according to whom attaining high standards is essential to the full development of the personality; he also makes references to Adler, who states that perfectionism is an indispensable part of life (p.107). According to Carver and Ganellen (1983) the tendency to adopt and to maintain high standards in several life domain is one of the three cognitive tendencies that are considered to be potential vulnerabilities to depression. In conclusion, having high standards only becomes a problem when this inclination is “accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations of their own behavior” (Frost, Marten, Lahart and Rosenblate, 1990, p. 450), “when it is combined with critical attitudes towards one's efforts”(Pyryt, 2007, p.90). When it is associated (moderated) with (by) the students' capacity to adapt proactively to the environmental demands (Bogdan, Rioux and Negovan, 2012), when the individual “had positive ways of coping with their perfectionism” (Pyryt, 2007, p.93), having high standards leads to greater performances in academic environment (Hill, Huelsman and Araujo, 2010).

The main purpose of the present study is to explore undergraduate psychology students' initial orientation toward the graduate studies programs in psychology. It was predicted that the undergraduate students' initial orientation toward the graduate studies programs in Psychology is differentiated by their learning experience (year of study) and by the level of proactive coping and of having high standards.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants in the present study were 150 undergraduate psychology students (1st, 2nd and 3rd year of study), aged 20 to 45 years ($M = 23.43$, $SD = 5.82$), 25 male and 125 female, at a private faculty of psychology (UTM), in Bucharest, Romania.

2.2. Instruments

Data were collected with the Proactive Coping Scale (Greenglass, Schwarzer and Taubert 1999) (14 items, e.g. I am a "take charge" person, I always try to find a way to work around obstacles; nothing really stops me), and with the High Standards Scale (3 items: e.g., "Compared to other people, I expect a lot from myself") from the Attitudes toward Self Scale (Carver and Ganellen, 1983). For each measure, items were averaged so that scores ranged from 1 (indicating the lowest level) to 5 (indicating the highest level). An additional questionnaire collected data about students' learning experience (year of study), gender, age, and their preferred master program in order to complete their undergraduate studies. The students have been instructed to arrange, according to their personal preferences (from the most preferred to the least preferred), 5 areas of psychology in which, at the moment of the investigation, they would be inclined to follow a specialization offered by master's degree programs.

2.3. Procedure

The study was conducted in 2012 – 2013 academic year. Students were asked to fill in the questionnaires outside of classes' time within a 3 day time period. The purpose of the questionnaires was explained and the filled questionnaires were handed directly to the researcher. Participation was voluntarily, students were informed about the aims and the nature of the study, and confidentiality was assured.

2.4. Data Analysis Procedures

The Chi square Test from Contingency Tables (χ^2), One-way analysis of variance and Univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted in order to test the research hypotheses. Prior to applying these statistical procedures, for the scores obtained in case of proactive coping and high standards, the tertiles of the series were computed and each of the 3 series of scores was coded into low (first tertile), medium (second tertile), and high (third tertile) levels of these variables.

3. Results

Results show that the Psychology master's degree programs towards which the questioned students were more inclined to go were, arranged according to preference (from the most likely to the least likely): Therapy (41.3%), Industrial Organizational Psychology (20.7%); Clinical Psychology (14.7%); Forensic Psychology (13.3%); Educational Psychology (10.0 %). The mean scores describe a slight ("medium") level of participants' proactive coping and tendency to have high standards (table 1).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's Alphas for the total research group (N=150)

Scale	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Proactive coping	3.82	0.66	.78
Having high standards	3.86	0.78	.84

3.1. Association between psychology undergraduate students' year of study and the preferred master's programs in Psychology

Pearson chi-square test revealed a statistically significant ($X^2(8, N = 150) = 27.99, p < .001$) association between students' learning experience (year of study) and their specialty orientation. Cramer's V was .30, which suggests that this relationship is moderately large. An interesting shift from 1st to 3rd year of undergraduate studies was found in relation to the preference for the Educational Psychology specialization (where the preference decreases abruptly in the 3rd year of study when compared to the 1st year of study) and also in the Industrial Organizational Psychology field and in the Clinical Psychology field (where the preferences increase in the 3rd year, comparative to the 1st year of study). The preference for the Therapy field remains relatively constant throughout the 3 years of undergraduate studies (table 2).

Table 2. Association between students' learning experience (year of study) and their specialty orientation

Preferred Graduate Study Programs	Year of study			Total
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	
Therapy	20	23	19	62
Industrial Organizational Psychology	3	17	11	31
Clinical Psychology	1	15	6	22
Forensic Psychology	2	14	4	20
Educational Psychology	9	5	1	15
Total	35	74	41	150

3.2. Differences in students' proactive coping and having high standards according to their specialty orientation

One Way Anova ($F_4 = 4.25, p = .003$) indicates that students oriented toward masters' programs in Clinical and Industrial-Organizational Psychology reported higher scores on having high standards ($M = 4.29$ and $4.09, SD = .67$ and $.71$) than the other categories ($M =$ from 3.61 to $3.88, SD =$ from $.51$ to $.84$). Students oriented toward masters' programs in Industrial-Organizational and Forensic psychology reported higher level of proactive coping ($M = 3.99$ and $3.98, SD = .68$ and $.71$) than the other categories ($M =$ from: 3.33 to $3.77, SD =$ from $.31$ to $.70$) ($F_4 = 3.28, p = .01$).

Univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that undergraduate students' specialty preferences are statistically significant differentiated by the interaction between: a) their learning experience and their age ($F_{(3, 149)} = 3.16, p = .02$, Partial eta squared $= .08$); b) their learning experience, age and level of having high standards ($F_{(2, 149)} = 3.14, p = .04$, Partial eta squared $= .06$) and c) their learning experience, age and level of proactive coping [$F_{(1, 149)} = 3.22, p = .03$ Partial eta squared $= .06$].

The master's degree program with the highest expressed preference (Therapy) is chosen by: a) young students (under the age of 20) in their first year of studies with a low score of the high standards and an average score in the proactive coping; b) students from the age group 21 to 29 years and 30 to 45 years in their 3rd year of studies with an average score of the high standards and an average score of the proactive coping; and c) students from the age group 30-45 years, in their second year of studies, presenting high scores both in the high standards and the proactive coping.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study was to investigate the undergraduate university students' preferences for master programs after they will complete their graduate studies according to their learning experience (1st vs. 2nd year of study), level of proactive coping and level of having high standards.

The study proved that undergraduate students' specialty preferences exist even during the first year of undergraduate studies and these preferences differ depending on their learning experiences, level of proactive coping and level of having high standards, which could express the already observed situation, "Today's psychology programs promote thinking and training that gear students to discover their own niches in the wide-ranging fields of interest and public need" (Oster, 2006, p.33).

One of the results of the study that could present interest for other specialists in this field refers to the fact that young students (under the age of 20) in their 1st year of study, with low high standards scores and average proactive coping scores express their preference for the program that is generally the most popular among other undergraduate students (Therapy).

The findings of the study are consistent with the findings of other studies: Zachar and Leong (1997); Kickul and Kickul (2006); Schrader and Brown (2008); Borges, et al. (2009); Schwartz-Mette (2009); Martin, Gavin, Baker and Bridgmon, 2007; Eby, Chin, Rollock, Schwartz and Worrell (2011).

Even though the results are interesting, a generalization of these findings should only be made with the necessary precautions, due to some limitations of the current study, such as the representativeness of the group (sample); the fact that data has only been collected with the use of self-report scales, the level of statistical data processing. Further efforts with the use of different scales and methods may expand these findings. Furthermore, a data collection procedure which would also allow the prediction of specialty choice would present a great interest.

Even considering all these limitations, the results of the study contribute to the understanding of the fact that „it is important to understand that all careers as psychologists require extensive graduate education and training” (Helms, and Rogers, 2011, p.8), and that the student's preparation for such demands starts – informally – during their undergraduate studies. The results suggest the usefulness of depth studies in including the expressed preferences of the psychology undergraduate students in the process of planning educational graduate programs.

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